Metropolitan Hilarion: Our task is to put the Patriarch's ideas into practice

On August 19, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, will celebrate the 30th anniversary of his ordination into priesthood. On the eve of this memorable date Vladyka gave an interview to the TASS news agency, in which he told why he had not become a musician, what success the Russian Orthodox Church had achieved in the international arena and in its relationships with the Old-Rite community, and how the theological education would help combat international terrorism.

- Thirty years ago you became hieromonk. How did it happen that, studying at the Composition Department of the Moscow Conservatoire, you became a clergyman?

- I left the Conservatoire first, then I entered a monastery, and only after that I took monastic vows and was ordained – first deacon, then priest. When I became a monk and was ordained into deaconate I was 20 years old, and by the time I was ordained priest, I was 21. However, I was 15 when I already decided that I wanted to devote my life to the Church and be a priest. I only had to wait until I reached the "canonical age" and, of course, did my military service. Otherwise they would not have admitted me to a seminary or ordain me. That is why after I finished school I entered the Conservatoire, but soon afterwards I was drafted into military service. When I returned I only studied for a short while, because my soul was drawn towards the Church, and not music.

- You have been the head of the Department for External Church Relations for almost 10 years. In fact, before your eyes the contemporary history of the Russian Orthodox Church's relationships with other religions all over the world has been unfolding. What has been done over these years to strengthen the position of the Russian Orthodox Church, and in which areas this work will be continued?

- Much has been done. I would like to emphasize that having handed over the post of the DECR chairman to me in March 2009, His Holiness continued to devote personal attention to the external activities of the Church and to take the most active part in it. More is to say, he guides this work. Therefore, we own all our accomplishments to him. Our task is to put the Patriarch's ideas into practice, reporting about our work to him and the Holy Synod.

I think that the authority of our Church at the inter-Orthodox level has risen greatly. We owe it to the Patriarch as well. The Primates of ten Local Orthodox Churches took part in the celebrations marking

his 70th birthday, and the other Churches sent high-level delegations. That is saying a lot. I think that our Church has never had such degree of mutual understanding with other Local Churches. Even the certain differences over the Crete Council did not hinder us from performing our common service to the Orthodoxy in the fraternal like-mindedness.

Considerable progress has been achieved at the inter-Christian level. The most important event in this sphere was the historic meeting between Patriarch Kirill and Pope Francis in Havana on February 12, last year. That meeting had been prepared for nearly 20 years, and I am glad that I had the pleasure of taking part in its preparation in the final stage. The meeting became possible thanks to a high level of mutual understanding as to such significant issues as the plight of Christians in the Middle East, the situation of Christianity in Europe, the protection of traditional values, including that of family and marriage. And it is very important that there is a mention of the Unia in the Joint Declaration of the Pope and the Patriarch.

Finally, we can clearly see the progress in interfaith contacts. I believe that the traditional religions of Russia have never before had such level of mutual understanding and trust. It was demonstrated by the recent session of the Interreligious Council of Russia chaired by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill. As the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, he does the work of utmost importance for our country, consolidating the traditional religions. And we help him to the best of our humble abilities.

The work will be continued in these above-mentioned areas, as well as in other spheres within the extensive mandate of the Department for External Church Relations. There is also such sphere of our activities as contacts with compatriots living abroad. We carry out this work in collaboration with the Moscow Patriarchate's Administration for Institutions Abroad.

- In 2016, the historic meeting between Patriarch Kirill and Pope Francis took place. And next week the Vatican's Secretary of State will arrive in Moscow. Does it mean that the relationships between the two Churches have reached a new level? What issues are to be discussed during this meeting?

- The visit of the Vatican's Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, is a state visit. However, he is planning to meet with His Holiness during his visit. I will also have a meeting with the Cardinal. The range of issues to be discussed includes the plight of Christians in the Middle East, the situation in Ukraine, etc.

- Just recently millions of the Russian people venerated the relics of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker, brought from Bari. That event aroused an unprecedented interest among the faithful. People spent hours in queues. Are there any plans to bring other shrines to our

country from abroad in the nearest future?

- The relics of St. Nicholas left Bari for the first time in 930 years in order to arrive in the country where he is venerated more than any other saint. This event became possible thanks to the meeting of the Pope and the Patriarch in Havana, for it was there that the agreement about it was achieved. I had the pleasure of implementing this project, of conducting negotiations over its various aspects with Pope Francis and Archbishop of Bari. And when the event took place, everybody considered it as a miracle, both here and in Italy. Almost two and a half million people venerated the relics of their beloved saint. There could be much more people had the relics stayed in Moscow or St. Petersburg for a longer time, or had they travelled across the country. For Vladivostok is much father from Moscow or St. Petersburg than Moscow is from Bari. Many of those who wanted to venerate the saint's relics could not do that because of the great distance.

I do not think that events of such scale can be regular. However, of course, some relics will be brought to Russia from other countries in future as well. My only wish is that we learn and speak more about our own shrines. No other country in the world has so many wonder-working icons and holy relics. And our people love their saints and their shrines. Suffice is to see those tens of thousands of people who gather in Yekaterinburg on the commemoration days of the royal passion-bearers, or in the Lavra of the Holy Trinity and St. Sergius on the commemoration days of St. Sergius, or to join the Velikoretsky Procession of the Cross. Regrettably, the mass media say so little about these mass pilgrimages of the Russian people to their holy places.

-In 2020, the Old Believers will celebrate the 400th anniversary of the birth of Archpriest Avvakum – a controversial figure in the history of the Church. Is the Russian Orthodox Church planning to take part in the celebrations, and what are the current relationships between the Orthodox Christians after the schism? Do you see any potential for rapprochement?

- We have established very good relations with the Old Believers. I often meet with Metropolitan Korniliy, for instance, before every session of the Presidential Council for Cooperation with Religious Organizations. We should not make too much haste and show too much zeal in this dialogue, considering the accumulated burden of problems. However, we must not forget the most important thing: we have one faith, the only difference is in rites. It may seem strange and absurd to someone that the schism was caused by the ritual trifles. One would think – what difference does it make to make a sign of the cross with two fingers or three, or how to write the name Iissous (*Jesus*), with one "i" or two? Yet, the schism was and still is grounded on these ritual matters.

I like the old rite very much. I used to study the Znamenny chant and neumatic notation, and compiled a

glossary of popevki (*melodic turns*) of the eight tones, and read the Psalter by the books written before Patriarch Nikon's reforms. Twice a year I celebrate the Liturgy at the Church of the Protecting Veil of the Mother of God in Rubtsovo, where the Patriarchal Centre of the Old Russian Culture is located.

Naturally, the Old Believers and we have different attitude to Archpriest Avvakum. For them he is a saint, while for us he is one of the initiators of the schism. However, we cannot deny his historical importance. We will participate in the celebrations to such extent that will be deemed appropriate to us and to our Old-Rite brothers. At least, we can, sitting at one table, discuss the literary heritage of Archpriest Avvakum who, undoubtedly, was one of the most prominent writers of his time: his autobiography is a most outstanding example of the 17th century Russian literature.

- These days we hear in the news about our compatriots going to Syria and other countries to, supposedly, "fight against infidels." How does the Russian Orthodox Church plan to cooperate with other religions to solve this pressing problem?

- I think that we should intensify the awareness-raising activities among the youth. Young people ought to know better the basics of their religious tradition and of the religious traditions of their neighbours. Since it is because of the ignorance in religious matters that our young people fall victim to the schemers who disguise their crimes with Islamic slogans and recruit young people to terrorist organizations.

The promotion of religious education, in secular higher education institutions in particular, may become one of the effective preventive measures. Much has been done in recent years. Theology has taken its place in the system of sciences recognized by the state; the dissertation council for theology has been established for the first time in the Russian history; the first thesis has been defended. There are chairs of theology in over 50 secular higher education institutions. Yet, it is not enough. We should open faculties of theology in the leading universities, and it is their graduates, and not random people, who should teach the basics of religious culture at schools.

The eradication of ignorance in religious sphere is an effective antidote to the ideology of terrorism. And it should become a nation-wide project, in which all the traditional religions of our country will be able to participate.

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